(b) whether 15 centres have been set-up to facilitate sales of stamps, speed post, money orders and other premium services in the State of Maharashtra;

(c) whether the franchise model is aimed at offering a range of postal services in areas of new demand, both in urban and rural segments; and

(d) if so, by when final decision in this regard is likely to be taken?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (DR. SHAKEEL AHMAD): (a) No, Sir. Department has not decided to franchise its services to private players. The scheme of Franchisee Outlets launched by the Department and operated through individual Franchisees, in specified urban areas, aims at creating additional points of access to the postal network and provides counter services like sale of stamps and stationery, booking of registered/Speed Post articles, collection of bill payments, booking of money orders, etc. The Franchisee outlets are functioning like extention counters of Departmental Post Offices and after booking of articles, collection of payments of bills from public, the same are sent to the linked departmental post office for further transmission, etc. The delivery and transmission of mails and savings bank work (other than cheque collection) etc. has not been franchised.

(b) At present, 13 Franchisee Outlets are functioning in Maharashtra State.

(c) and (d) Franchisee Scheme has been launched only in specified urban locations. The scheme has not been launched in rural areas. There is no proposal to open Franchisee Outlets in rural areas.

Hike in prices by telecom operators

444. SHRI RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR: Will the Minister of COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY be pleased state:

(a) whether Government are aware that certain telecom operators have recently hiked prices in a coordinated manner;

(b) if so, whether Government/TRAI have investigated the same; and

(c) if so, the nature of the findings and the action taken in case Government/TRAI have come to the conclusion that the increase was unjustified?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (DR. SHAKEEL AHMAD): (a) Yes, Sir. The tariff report filed with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) by some of the major telecom operators like Airtel, Vodafone and Idea cellular who are operating in a number of service areas indicate that there have been increase in tariffs in some for the service areas.

(b) and (c) Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) under TRAI Act, 1997 has been mandated to fix and regulate telecom tariffs. TRAI has also been empowered to review and modify telecom tariffs. TRAI *vide* its Telecommunication Tariff Order (TTO) 1999 has adopted a policy of *forbearance* except for the tariff of the three categories *viz.*, rural subscribers, roaming charges for cellular services and leased circuits. Since the policy provides flexibility to all telecommunications service providers to fix tariff, the intervention of the Authority in telecommunication tariff is made when tariff implemented by the operator is not consistent with the framework laid down by the TTO. Two consumer organizations have filed petitions in the Hon'ble Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT) against tariff hikes recently effected by Airtel, Vodafone and Idea Cellular. The Hon'ble Tribunal has not passed and final order in these cases.